The National Mediation Board
Online Dispute Resolution Project

Online Dispute Resolution

Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) is a general term covering a variety of approaches to dispute resolution that all share one common element – the use of computers to assist the dispute resolution process.

On one end of the spectrum there are ODR programs that at least partially "automate" resolutions, such as the one in use by eBay to resolve disputes between buyers and sellers.

On the other end are ODR programs that simply use computers to make brainstorming or decision making quicker, or allow parties to work on ideas or documents without having to meet face to face for the entire process.

The National Mediation Board has taken steps to ensure that the latest ODR technology is at the disposal of its mediators as they conduct training and negotiations in the airline and railroad industries. The Board's approach to ODR is on the end of the spectrum that seeks to speed up and improve decision making, not automate decision making – the NMB's ODR program is not offered in place of face to face meetings, nor is it intended to take control of the dispute resolution process away from the parties.

The NMB web site has links to very good resources related to online dispute resolution, which will be added to as more resources become available. In addition to the "automated" functions of some ODR programs, there are a couple of other sets of terms of which anyone beginning to learn about ODR should be aware.

First is the "synchronous/asynchronous" nature of ODR. This simply refers to whether the users of the ODR system are all on line at the same time (synchronous) or whether they are logging on to the system and working at different times (asynchronous). For users who are separated geographically or who have different schedules, the ability to log on and contribute ideas or comment on shared information can be very convenient.

The second set of terms related to ODR is "proximate/distant." Proximate users are all in the room together, using computers to contribute ideas or evaluate ideas – the computers become an adjunct to a traditional facilitated or mediated discussion. Distant users may be working together, but separated geographically – a facilitator may be on a phone line with all of them, or on the screen with all of them.

Obviously this gives groups a variety of ways to structure and use ODR – all together in the same room at the same time; all together but in different places; at different times in the same place; and at different times in different places.